

The Lavon Affair: When Israel Firebombed U.S. Installations

www.wrmea.org/1992-july/the-lavon-affair-when-israel-firebombed-u.s.-installations.html

Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, July 1992, pages 41-42, 86

Thirty-Eight Years Ago This Month

By Richard H. Curtiss

"I just can't figure out what the Israelis think they're up to...Maybe they think they just can't survive without more land...but I don't see how they can survive without coming to some honorable and peaceful terms with the whole Arab world that surrounds them." U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, October 1956 (As related by Eisenhower speech writer Emmet John Hughes in his book, *The Ordeal of Power, A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years*, 1964)

The election of General of the Armies Dwight D. Eisenhower as U.S. president in November 1952 brought more than a change of parties to the White House. After leading Allied armies to victory in Europe in World War II, Eisenhower had returned to civilian life as president of Columbia University. But as the U.S. and Western Europe grew increasingly fearful of Soviet intentions, he returned to Europe to organize the defense forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

By the time he had completed this task, he was so popular with the U.S. public that he could have had the presidential nomination of either party. He chose the Republicans, whose delegates, in an open convention, nominated the general instead of "party insider" Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio. Eisenhower then easily defeated a strong Democratic candidate, Gov. Adlai Stevenson of Illinois, in the general election.

As a result, when he entered the White House, Eisenhower was his own man, with a personal political base so secure he could not be challenged successfully by any single interest group, as the nascent pro-Israel lobby learned toward the end of his first term.

While rank-and-file Republicans were overcoming the party regulars to nominate Eisenhower in July 1952, Egyptians were overthrowing their government in a nearly bloodless revolution. Egypt's 1948 debacle against Israeli soldiers in Palestine was a catalyst for the coup by army officers humiliated at the high-level sloth and corruption it had revealed in the government of Egypt's playboy King Farouk. Two years later, Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the driving force behind the original coup, deposed its figure-head leader, General Mohammad Naguib, and assumed power himself.

Both Israeli and American Arabists who had picked the handsome, eloquent colonel as the officer to watch in the Egyptian revolutionary government now picked him as the leader to watch in the Arab world. In each country, secret chains of events were set in motion, but at least one of the Israeli plans was diametrically opposed to that of the United States.

Eisenhower was uniquely qualified to understand the peacemaking potential of a charismatic military leader with a strong personal political base. Assured by his Middle East advisers that Nasser was such a leader, he set out to woo the Egyptian president through Kermit Roosevelt, grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt, an earlier charismatic U.S. president whose political career began with a military victory in the Spanish-American War and ended in a vain attempt to keep the United States out of World War I.

To keep the American press, which already had developed strong pro-Israel leanings, off the track, Eisenhower used U.S. and Egyptian intelligence channels. The strategy was to assure Nasser that the United States was ready to

adjust its Middle East policies to his politics of reform if the Egyptian leader was prepared to make peace with Israel and thus remove at one stroke the greatest strain on Egypt's budget and the only serious irritant in U.S.-Arab relations.

In Israel, without the knowledge of the United States, however, at least three separate operations also were initiated to deal with the Nasser phenomenon. One eventually was destined to become a cancer in the political life of Israel, where some insiders later described it as "Israel's Dreyfus case."

"Israel's Dreyfus Case"

There were two main forces in Israeli politics at the time. One was David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, who in 1948 had proclaimed the independence of the Jewish state and whose Old Testament patriarchal mien was the symbol of Israel's war of independence.

Throughout his career, Ben-Gurion had moved steadily away from the moderation and flexibility of Chaim Weizmann, who in the two decades before and during World War II had secured British and American support for a Jewish state, and toward the defiance that after 1948 became so familiar to Arab opponents and Western mediators. As prime minister, Ben-Gurion stubbornly refused to implement repeated United Nations resolutions calling on Israel to return the territory it had seized in the 1948 fighting and repatriate or compensate the Arab refugees who had fled or been expelled.

The other force was Moshe Sharett, Ben-Gurion's foreign minister in 1953, who then succeeded him as prime minister during one of the convulsions that increasingly racked Israel's ruling coalition of non-communist leftist parties. Sharett believed that a policy of Israeli moderation in the face of Arab guerrilla attacks, Israeli compensation of Arab refugees, and an understanding with Egypt on boundaries ultimately could bring about a peaceful acceptance of Israel by its Arab neighbors.

First Ben-Gurion, and later Sharett, attempted to establish contact with the new Egyptian leader. Ben-Gurion's attempt was through popular Israeli military hero Yigael Allon, then a private citizen. After the Oct. 14, 1948 cease-fire, Allon's troops had surrounded a large force of Egyptian troops, including Nasser, in the Faluja pocket, and then refused to return to the cease-fire lines. In the course of negotiating U.N.-supervised passage of supplies to the encircled Egyptian troops and, in February 1949, their withdrawal to Egypt, Allon had met Nasser several times.

The Allon initiative slowed when Sharett assumed the prime ministership, and himself attempted to initiate contacts with Nasser through other intermediaries. However, possibly unknown to Sharett, the Israeli army intelligence organization, which operated independently of the Mossad, Israel's equivalent of the CIA, was laying its own secret plans.

Both before and since Nasser's time, concerns of hard-line Israeli leaders have focused not on the radical Arabs, but rather on moderate Arab leaders who maintain ties to the West. Obviously, if the West ever reached an agreement with the Arabs at the expense of further Israeli territorial ambitions, it would be with such moderate Arabs.

Efforts by the Eisenhower administration to cultivate the charismatic Egyptian colonel had been detected by Israeli intelligence operatives, who also were concerned about Nasser's negotiations with the British for withdrawal of their forces from Egypt's Suez Canal zone, scheduled for July 1954.

In their 1979 book, *The Untold History of Israel*, Israeli journalists Jacques Derogy and Hesi Carmel relate that in 1954 Israel's army intelligence section conceived a plan to attack British personnel seconded to King Hussein's government in Jordan. The purpose was to sour relations between Britain and Jordan as well as between both Jordan and Britain on the one hand and Egypt, which would be blamed for such attacks.

Shortly afterward, the same Israeli army intelligence organization activated two networks of Egyptian Jews first established in 1948. These young people had been recruited in Egypt, secretly trained in Israel, and then sent back

to their homes in Cairo and Alexandria to await orders to carry out acts of sabotage in case of war between Egypt and Israel.

Now the networks were to explode small incendiary bombs in American installations in Egypt, presumably to set off a chain of mutual recriminations to spoil the budding Eisenhower-Nasser courtship. After completing their sabotage of American installations, the same networks next were to bomb public places in Cairo and Alexandria, actions that Nasser would attribute to the Muslim Brotherhood, which supported the deposed General Naguib, and thus create a climate of Egyptian instability during the British-Egyptian Canal Zone negotiations.

An Israeli spymaster posing as a German businessman was sent to Cairo to set the plan in motion. On July 14, 1954, while French-influenced Egyptians celebrated Bastille Day as a symbol of the overthrow of monarchies both in France and in Egypt, incendiary devices exploded in U.S. Information Service libraries and consular offices open to the public in both Cairo and Alexandria.

Although the resulting small fires caused minor property damage, there were no casualties and none of the U.S. government buildings targeted were destroyed. The sabotage of U.S. installations alerted Egyptian police, however. They assigned special patrols to crowded public places in both cities.

Nine days later, on July 23, during Egyptian commemoration of the second anniversary of its revolution, members of the Israeli sabotage network took firebombs to the Cairo railway station and to movie theaters in Cairo and Alexandria.

As one of the young Egyptian Jews, Philippe Nathanson, stood in front of an Alexandria theater, the incendiary device he was carrying ignited prematurely. After bystanders beat out the fire in his clothing, a policeman took him into custody for questioning about the fire that witnesses said had begun in his pocket.

Within days 11 persons were in custody. They included all members of both the Cairo and Alexandria sabotage networks and an additional Israeli spy who was not a part of either network. Only the Israeli spymaster who had set the plan in motion escaped, leading members of competing Israeli intelligence services to question for years afterward why the plan's instigator had been able to slip out of Egypt, but another Israeli agent, whose identity was known to the instigator, was caught.

Extinguishing Hopes of Moderation

Although the sabotage plan misfired, literally, it succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of its Israeli planners in extinguishing all hopes of moderation—not in Egypt but in Israel. The arrested provocateurs were brought to trial in Cairo on Dec. 11, 1954. Among them was an Egyptian Jewish girl, Victorine Ninio, who had to be assisted into the courtroom after she reportedly twice tried to commit suicide while under Egyptian interrogation. The unaffiliated spy, Max Bennett, had been more successful in avoiding interrogation. The Egyptian press reported he had killed himself with a rusty nail pried from his cell door.

As the trial opened, the Israeli press reported emotionally the details of what it assumed to be a show trial on baseless charges intended to terrorize remnants of Egypt's once large Jewish community. Assuming the same thing, British and French political leaders begged Nasser in vain to halt the proceedings.

Seemingly most indignant of all was the first moderate prime minister in Israel's brief history, Moshe Sharett. According to Israeli journalists Derogy and Carmel, Sharett's indignation was not feigned.

This, they maintain, was because when his Egyptian Jewish agents were exposed, the Israeli army intelligence chief, Col. Benjamin Gibli, carefully covered his own tracks. Although there were others in the chain of command who knew the truth, Gibli's immediate superior, Gen. Moshe Dayan, seems to have assisted Gibli in assuring that blame for the operation would fall on Dayan's own direct superior, Defense Minister Pinchas Lavon. Lavon, like

Sharett, according to the Israeli journalists, may have known little or nothing about the plan to drive a wedge between Egypt and the West by torching U.S. government facilities in Cairo and Alexandria.

In any case, on Dec. 12, 1954, the second day of the Cairo trial, Sharett angrily denounced "these calumnies designed to strike at the Jews of Egypt." Later, when death sentences were handed down against some of the conspirators, Sharett vowed, "We will not negotiate in the shadow of the gallows."

At that moment, the separate Eisenhower, Ben-Gurion and Sharett efforts to establish indirect contacts leading to Egyptian-Israeli peace negotiations all began to unravel. Egyptians, angry at the seeming hypocrisy of the Israeli prime minister's scathing denials of actions that clearly had originated with the Israeli government, began breaking off contacts.

By Jan. 20, 1955, two of the conspirators had been hanged in Egypt and hopes among moderates for an Israeli-Egyptian rapprochement died with them. Blamed by Sharett's political rival, Ben-Gurion, for the botched plot, Lavon resigned on Feb. 7 and was replaced as defense minister by Ben-Gurion later in the month.

Ben-Gurion immediately initiated drastic military actions against Egypt. These included a massive Israeli incursion into the Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip, and the assassination by letter bomb of an Egyptian officer the Israelis said was directing guerrilla raids into Israel from Gaza.

Shaken by the Gaza raid, which he had been powerless to stop, Nasser turned to the U.S. with a request for \$27 million in arms. Mindful of a 1950 agreement with Britain and France to maintain an arms balance between Israel and the Arabs, and confident that Egypt was short of funds, the U.S. informed Nasser that he would have to pay cash for the arms.

"Our attitude may, with the advantage of hindsight, appear to have been unrealistic," Eisenhower wrote later. It was.

The Soviet Union offered Nasser arms for Egyptian cotton instead of cash. Nasser, however, was not eager to loosen ties with the West.

Then, in September 1955, shortly before elections which brought Ben-Gurion back into the prime ministership, Israeli troops raided another Egyptian outpost. This time Nasser accepted Soviet-brokered Czechoslovak arms on barter terms. This set off a punitive move by the United States, which questioned Nasser's ability, with his cotton and rice crops mortgaged, to repay loans he was seeking from the World Bank to build what became the Aswan High Dam.

The Soviets in turn offered to finance the dam, while the Israelis began pressing their major supplier, France, and the U.S. for arms to offset those being supplied to Egypt. Seeing things were getting out of hand, the U.S. again tried to initiate secret contacts.

This time President Eisenhower's emissary was his close friend, former Secretary of the Navy Robert Anderson, who shuttled via various European countries between Nasser and Ben-Gurion. Nasser insisted that a personal meeting was unthinkable in the current bitter political climate. Ben-Gurion insisted that only in a face-to-face meeting could he reveal the full extent of the concessions Israel was prepared to deliver.

By February 1956 the Anderson mission had failed, the Egyptians were receiving their Soviet-brokered arms, and Israel, after its arms request was refused by the U.S., was receiving secret deliveries of French aircraft, tanks and munitions.

There followed the withdrawal by U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, largely as a result of Israeli lobbying in Congress, of U.S. funding for the Aswan High Dam. Nasser, in turn, nationalized the British- and French-owned Suez Canal.

That triggered the buildup toward the Oct. 29, 1956 Israeli-French-British attack, only days before the U.S. national election, on Egypt and the Suez Canal. That in turn was followed by Eisenhower's successful demands that Britain and France abandon their attempt to take back the Canal by military force, and that Israel withdraw from the Egyptian territory it had seized. It was the first and only attempt to link [U.S. aid to Israel](#) to a peace settlement until 35 years later in 1991, when the administration of President George Bush tied U.S. loan guarantees sought by Israel to a freeze on Israeli settlements in occupied territories.

The 1954 Israeli plot and coverup that set in motion events leading up to the 1956 Suez War became known as the "Haessek Habish" (Ugly Affair) to Israeli journalists, who have written thousands of words about the coverup, but very little to reveal that the original "security mishap" for which so many Israeli officials sought to evade responsibility had been a sabotage attempt against U.S. diplomatic and cultural offices in Egypt.

Even worse has been the obfuscation in the mainstream American press. Because the affair lingered on for a decade as a running sore in Israeli political life, it could not be ignored. As it took on a life of its own, U.S. and British journalists began calling it the "Lavon Affair."

Forged Documents and Perjured Testimony

The reason was that Ben-Gurion had hounded Defense Minister Pinchas Lavon from office on the basis of what later were revealed to be forged documents and perjured testimony. Among Ben-Gurion political protégés subsequently implicated in the manufacture of the false evidence were Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres, both of whom later became fixtures of Israeli Labor Coalition governments.

Lavon, however, eventually was rehabilitated. His by then embittered and irascible persecutor, David Ben-Gurion, twice had to leave public office, the last time in 1964, because of the Lavon Affair. Four years later, four surviving Egyptian Jewish provocateurs, including Victorine Ninio and the luckless Nathanson, were released to Israel by Egypt as part of the general exchange of prisoners which took place after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Their arrival in Israel received low-key coverage in the Israeli press and virtually none in the U.S., reflecting the shameful dereliction of the mainstream American media coverage of the story from the beginning. Years after the event, *The New York Times* finally described in its back pages the real nature of the sabotage operation.

Generally, however, U.S. newspapers continued describing "the Lavon Affair" as a series of internal Israeli government investigations of a highly classified, unspecified "security mishap." To this day, few American journalists know, or will admit to knowing, about this first detected instigation by the Israel Defense Forces and intelligence agencies of anti-American incidents in preparation for an attack by Israel on its Arab neighbors.

This report was adapted from Chapter Six of A Changing Image: American Perceptions of the Arab-Israeli Dispute by Richard H. Curtiss, which is available from the [AET Book Club](#). Mr. Curtiss, executive editor of the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, was an officer of the U.S. Information Agency at the time of the Israeli firebombing of its libraries in Cairo and Alexandria.